

LINKING URBAN TOWNSCAPE WITH RURAL LANDSCAPE: EVIDENCE OF ANIMAL TRANSHUMANCE IN THE RIVER IVEL VALLEY, BEDFORDSHIRE

By MATT EDGEWORTH¹

Introduction

This paper examines four ostensibly separate archaeological features: a town market-place, an ancient ford across a river, an enigmatic ringwork, and a recently discovered broad driveway running for several kilometres through nearby countryside – all located within the valley of the River Ivel in central Bedfordshire.

Figure 1 shows the area within which connections between the different townscape and landscape elements will be drawn. All the sites and features discussed are situated within the broad and fertile floodplain of the Ivel, but the archaeology on the two sides of the river could not be more different: flowing from south to north, the river today effectively forms the boundary between urban and non-urban areas. The river has served as a boundary throughout much of the historical period, dividing the parish of Biggleswade from that of Old Warden, and the hundred of Biggleswade from that of Wixamtree. All of this has probably discouraged archaeologists from making the connections between townscape and countryside that are advocated, for example, by the various authors in Giles and Dyer (2005). Thus an archaeological study of the townscape of Biggleswade to the east of the River Ivel (Albion Archaeology 2000) made use of methods and perspectives of extensive urban survey, while studies of land to the west of the river (Mortimer and McFadyen 1999) are framed within a very different tradition of landscape archaeology. Both stop at the river. In each case authors were constrained by the research parameters of the respective projects, which themselves used the river as a convenient outer boundary of the areas of investigation. Some of the continuities between those two studies in particular, and connections between town and countryside more generally in the late Anglo-Saxon and early Norman periods, will be explored in this paper.

The first part will examine the four components separately, summarising the evidence available and problems (of form, function, chronology) which need to be addressed. These issues will then be tackled in the second part by considering the components in relation to each other rather than as distinct and separate entities. It will be shown that each component, so difficult to fully understand in isolation, is closely associated with the other three, and that the urban townscape and rural landscape either side of the river were in the past inextricably woven together. More specifically, it will be argued that the individual components make much more sense when taken as parts of an inter-related and evolving system of animal transhumance, linking upland, valley and developing urban zones.

The components

The market-place

The first element of the landscape is the broad market-place of Biggleswade itself. Although infilled and encroached upon since the Middle Ages by buildings and streets, its former outline can still be discerned as a long trapezoidal shape marked on two sides by Market Street and High Street, oriented east–west.

The market-place measures about 130–140m in length and 70–80m wide at its broadest (eastern) end, although it probably originally extended further to both west and east. A charter for a market to be held in Biggleswade was granted by King John (1199–1216) and confirmed by Henry III in 1227. The Bishop of Lincoln held the manor and there is a tradition that a Bishop's Palace stood in the vicinity of the church, or just south of the market-place in Palace Street (Albion Archaeology 2000: 12–13). The market-place seems to have been laid out formally at some time in the 12th–13th centuries, with records of burghage plots dating from the early 13th century (Page 1908). It has been suggested that the market-place may have been laid out at right angles to an existing road system aligned north–south – a deliberate strategy to re-route traffic between Baldock and Sandy through the town (Dawson 1994; Albion Archaeology 2000: 13). However, such a re-fashioning of the town plan would have required extensive demolition of existing properties if undertaken from scratch and it seems likely that any such planning event would have made use of pre-existing features and layouts.

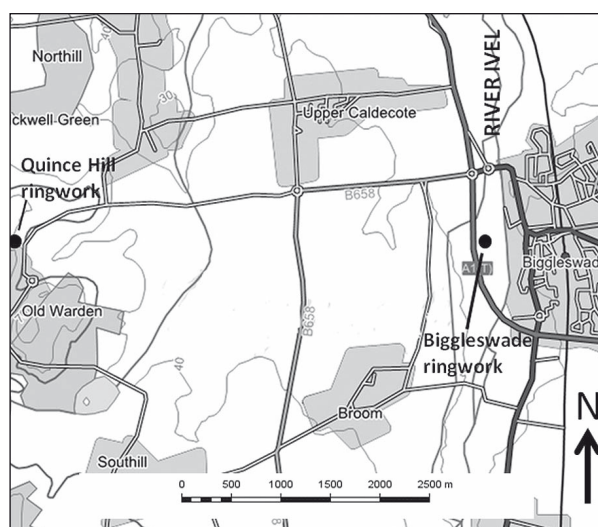


Figure 1 The River Ivel valley between Biggleswade and Old Warden, central Bedfordshire. © Crown Copyright/database right 2009. An Ordnance Survey/EDINA supplied service.

¹ University of Leicester.

The following questions therefore arise: (a) given the apparently predominant north–south orientation of roads through the town, how and why did the market-place gain its east–west orientation? (b) could the market-place have been laid out along the line of a pre-existing east–west feature or orientation in the layout of the earlier town?

The ford

The second element of the landscape is the ford which gave the town the latter part of its name. The placename *Biggleswade* is derived from *Bichelsuade* or *Bicca's Wade*, with 'wade' meaning 'ford' (Mawer and Stenton, 1926: 101). The location of the ford, however, is not known with any certainty. There was a bridge crossing the River Ivel to the north-west of the town, on the site of the present bridge, by at least the 14th century (Simco and McKeague 1997: 10). A question much discussed, however, is whether there may have been an earlier medieval crossing closer to the church on the line of the market-place, and whether this was in fact the location of the ford or 'wade' which gave the town its name (Albion Archaeology 2000: 14). We will return to this shortly.

The ringwork

On the western bank of the river, the opposite bank from the town, is Biggleswade ringwork, which is sometimes referred to as Biggleswade Castle (NGR TL 1843 4452). Despite its name, the ringwork seems oddly divorced from the town of Biggleswade, and it is in fact situated within the parish of Old Warden. It is currently located about 300m away from the now canalised river, but was formerly situated on a gravel island between braided river courses. A scheduled monument, the site is classed as a ringwork-and-bailey (NMR 362741, Beds HER 468). It was initially recognised from aerial photos in 1954 (St Joseph 1966): the distinctive and enigmatic cropmarks of this monument are shown in Fig. 2.

On the face of it, the aerial views seem to indicate a typical medieval ringwork-and-bailey plan with circular inner ditch and oval outer ditch, possibly overlying earlier curvilinear cropmarks. Nearby is a rectangular cropmark of unknown date. But the segmented patterning within the ditches of both ringwork and bailey is extremely atypical and has never been adequately explained. Limited excavation in 1962 did not locate the anticipated sides or fill of the ringwork ditch that appears to be indicated by the aerial photos; instead it found a much shallower archaeology with smaller gully-like features on different orientations within the area of the supposed ditch. From above the interspace between two of these features was 'a layer, from 6ins to 12ins deep, of gravelly yellow grey soil with charcoal, pottery and considerable amounts of burnt daub and clay. It looked much like a destruction layer derived from timber and daub buildings' (Addyman 1966: 17). Of the segmented pattern visible from the air, Addyman (reiterating the words of St Joseph 1966: 142) states that 'the curious subdivision of these ditches, particularly marked in the outer ditch, which appears partitioned into a series of compartments... are not easy to explain. On some photographs the "subdivisions", which must be narrow balks of firm ground, appear so regularly spaced that there can be no doubt they are a primary feature of the

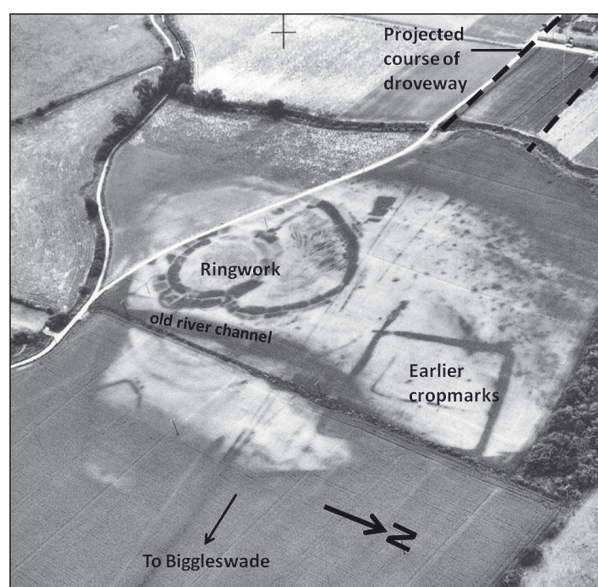


Figure 2 The Biggleswade ringwork (aerial view reproduced by permission of the Cambridge University Collection of Air Photos).

design. Gang-work, with the construction left unfinished, is hardly the explanation...' (Addyman 1966: 15).

Another puzzle concerns the date of the monument. Eight sherds of pottery obtained from upper fills were all from cooking pots of St Neots ware, a type that can be broadly dated from the late Saxon to early Norman period. While the excavator assigned an early 12th century date to the pottery, he highlighted the apparent anomaly that there were no sherds of 'developed St Neots ware' within the assemblage, as one might expect for that time in this part of Bedfordshire. Although Addyman (1966: 17) used the pottery to date the monument 'almost certainly to the century following the Norman Conquest' (fitting in with the identification of it as a ringwork-and-bailey), there is nevertheless the possibility that it could be somewhat earlier. Even if the pottery is early Norman in date, this may relate to later phases of use or disuse.

Outstanding questions about the ringwork, then, are: (a) why do both inner and outer ditches appear to be segmented? (b) in view of the fact that a trench placed across the ringwork ditch failed to find the sides or fill of the expected feature, should we even be calling these features 'ditches' at all? (c) is the monument really a ringwork-and-bailey that originated in the early Norman period, or could it be earlier in date? and (d) what was the relation between the ringwork and the town of Biggleswade on the other side of the river?

The droveway

A programme of excavation and landscape survey in Broom Quarry, covering an area of 2½ km² just to the west of Biggleswade and on the other side of the River Ivel, was conducted by Richard Mortimer and Lesley McFadyen of Cambridge Archaeological Unit from 1996–1999. It revealed a prehistoric landscape of Neolithic and Bronze Age features, as well as some Anglo-Saxon and medieval settlement and burial evidence. Of particular interest was a pair of parallel ditches running from east to west, probably dating to the

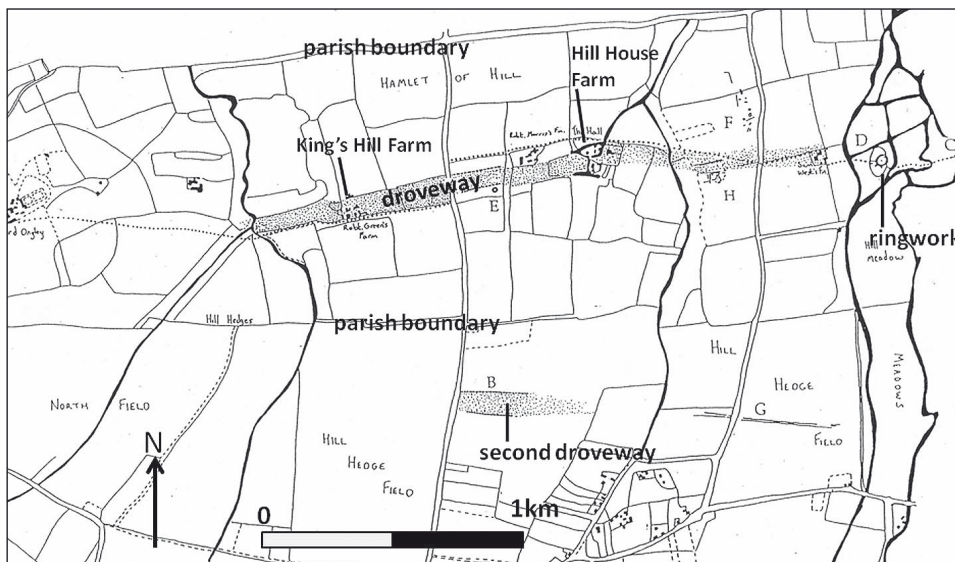


Figure 3 The droveway (adapted from Mortimer and McFadyen 1999, Fig 12, p.58, by permission of Richard Mortimer and Lesley McFadyen).

middle Anglo-Saxon period, forming part of what was interpreted as a broad green road or droveway (Mortimer and McFadyen 1999: 48–59).

This east–west droveway is no small winding lane. The straight parallel ditches excavated are 80–90m apart. The course of the droveway appears to be embedded within surviving field boundaries and can be traced for several kilometres, linking up with the Greensand Ridge to the west (Fig. 3).

Almost certainly it represents not just a trackway for movement but also pasture for grazing by animals herded along it – perhaps a kind of linear common or green of the kind identified by Susan Oosthuizen. She argues that such features could be survivals of the early to middle Saxon period although there are strong indications that they might belong to relict landscapes from even earlier times (Oosthuizen 1993; 2002).

Along the line of the route are several farms of Old Warden parish. One of these, Hill House Farm, is unusual in that up to the 16th century it had its own chapel, giving rise to the view that it was once an important manorial centre (Beds HER 14122). King's Hill Farm is also clearly a farm of long standing, with an interesting name that might be taken to imply some kind of royal control (Beds HER 12854).

To the east, the droveway heads straight for the River Ivel and presumably forded its many braided channels in order to enter the town of Biggleswade itself. Pottery from excavated segments of the droveway ditches consisted of a small number of prehistoric, Roman and Saxon sherds, many of which must be residual. Medieval ridge and furrow lines show up on aerial photos running within and parallel to the ditches, and would have been created when the droveway had fallen into disuse. The droveway could theoretically be anything from late Roman to 12th century, but is thought on balance to be 8th–9th century in date (see discussion and details in Mortimer and McFadyen 1999: 51–2).

Another similar pair of parallel ditches, also heading east–west, was found to the south. But this latter trackway appears to have fallen out of use before it became a major route; it was not fossilised into later

landscape features like the northern route. Indeed, what makes the northern trackway especially interesting here is the extent to which it is embedded in the landscape, and particularly its relationship to the parish boundaries either side. As Mortimer and McFadyen (1999: 57, Fig 13) have shown, the parish boundaries of Old Warden appear to have been shaped to accommodate the pre-existing trackway, forming a broad east–west corridor up to 1km wide and over 4km long. The trackway runs right along the centre of this corridor (Fig. 4).

The Old Warden corridor effectively divides what was clearly once a single estate or territory, encompassing

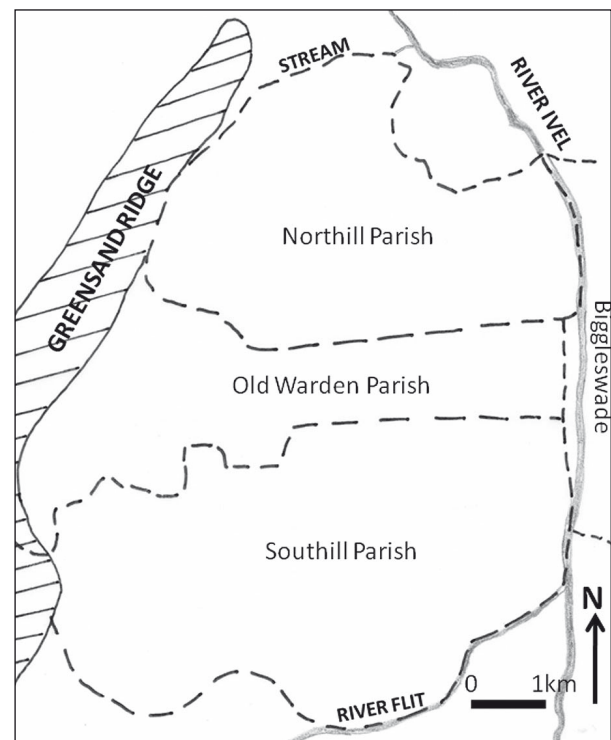


Figure 4 Parish boundaries (after Mortimer and McFadyen 1999: 57).

Northhill and Southill, the whole being neatly circumscribed by natural topographical features on all sides. Wood (1987) argues that this territory represents the former land of the *Gifle* people, mentioned in the Tribal Hideage – their name associated with or derived from that of the River Ivel itself. The placenames Northhill and Southill appear in the Domesday Book as *Nortgiuele* and *Sudgiuele*; that is, according to one interpretation, as northern and southern settlements of the *Gifle* tribe (Mills 2003).

The overall configuration of parish boundaries in Bedfordshire is thought to have been largely set in place by the early 10th century, though many were probably based on much older boundaries. There are numerous examples known of tracks forming parts of parish boundaries, either as existing features incorporated into the boundary, or boundaries which came to be used as convenient tracks. But there are few examples of parish boundaries specifically aligned to enclose tracks within a corridor of land. Something unusual and significant is going on here which needs to be better understood.

Linking components

As can be seen in the discussion above, it is almost impossible to treat the droveway as a distinct component, separate from other components in the archaeological landscape (like ringworks, medieval chapels, fords or parish boundaries). What are roads and tracks if not physical connections across landscapes and between places, often enduring in time from one period to another? In fact, the droveway discovered by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit links together all the other components described so far. From this point on, then, I will consider all the components together as connected features, the understanding of which is transformed through examining each one in the light of associations with the others.

We might observe, for example, that the position of the ringwork on the gravel island on the west side of the river suddenly makes more sense once we realise that it is situated on a major routeway. Before, it was a complete mystery as to why a ‘castle’ or ‘ringwork’ should be located on the other side of the river from the town; now it can be seen to be on a probable river-crossing, linked to the town by the droveway/ford and probably controlling both river and road traffic. Could it be that its function was mainly to do with sorting and control of animals along the droveway, across the ford (where animals could be watered), and into and out of the town?

In an important paper, Neil Christie has shown how castles in central Italy were often sited to oversee movements of shepherds and their huge flocks over long distances along the network of *tratturi* or drove-roads linking upland to lowland zones (Christie 2008). With a standard width of 111m the *tratturi* are wider than the broad droveway discovered by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit, and they are occasionally situated within even broader linear corridors up to a kilometre wide. By royal decree of 1447, vast numbers of sheep were taken to upland pastures in Abruzzo province for the summer and brought back to the plains of Puglia in the autumn. This system of animal transhumance was highly regulated and controlled in the late Middle Ages, but it is generally thought to be far more ancient with the

tradition going back to Roman and perhaps prehistoric times. Focusing upon the Sangro Valley in the Abruzzo province and the Cicolano in Lazio province, Christie’s study reveals ‘clear investment in structures of surveillance to monitor, direct and control the movement and pasturage of sheep’ (Christie 2008: 118).

Mirroring the position of the Biggleswade ringwork at the eastern end of the corridor formed by the Old Warden parish boundaries, there is another anomalous earthwork known as Quince Hill at the western end. Also categorized as a ringwork, its date has been variously ascribed to the Iron Age, the Saxon period and early Norman times. Mortimer and McFadyen (1999: 58) regard it as an Iron Age monument reused in Saxon times as a defensive look-out (the place-name *Old Warden* is derived from the Old English for *watch-hill*). Is it possible that these monuments, situated at either end of the corridor, were used during the middle to late Saxon period to control access into and out of the corridor? Could these be comparable to Christie’s ‘structures of surveillance’, overseeing large-scale movements of animals?

Further work is of course required to verify any possible link. But the potential for seeing such sites *in relation to each other*, rather than as isolated monuments, has at least been raised. Or, to put it another way, a pattern has emerged which suggests there might be intriguing connections between sites that were previously regarded as unconnected. The droveway is a significant discovery not just for itself but also because of its relationships with the sites along its course and the wider context of boundaries which persisted in the landscape for a considerable period of time. It effectively changes our perception of the archaeological landscape as a whole.

Perhaps the most significant insight which the discovery of the droveway has to offer regards the development of the town of Biggleswade itself. Not only is the general trajectory of the droveway heading across the river and into the town, confirming with a high degree of certainty where the main ford or river-crossing was, but it is also heading straight along the broad east–west market-place. Or rather the market-place, which has been greatly encroached upon by buildings and reduced in size over the centuries, is within the extrapolated course of the droveway. To all intents and purposes, the course of the market-place is the course of the droveway (Fig. 5).

This is a very significant finding because, as already noted, the broad east–west road that forms Biggleswade market-place is generally supposed to have originated in 12th–13th century town planning rather than as an earlier feature. Now it can be seen that any realignment of the town or supposed instatement of a market square that took place in the early Norman period must have made use of this pre-existing broad routeway – clearly one of the most important features of the early town.

The precise location of the ford or ‘wade’ which gave Biggleswade part of its name, as already noted, was not previously known with any certainty. But now the position of the ford can be pinpointed with considerable accuracy, simply by joining up the line of the routeway coming in from the west with the line of the market place on its projected course to the east. The existence of the newly discovered droveway strongly indicates the location of the ford and suggests an earlier date for the

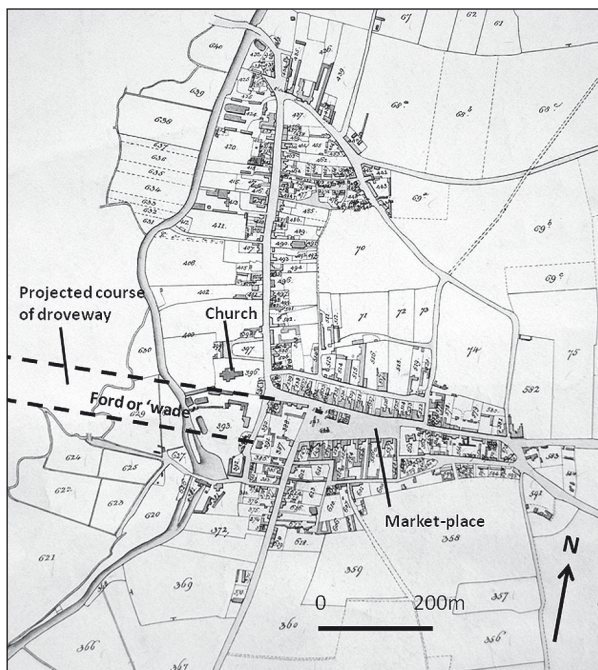


Figure 5 Droeway and marketplace (the Biggleswade 1838 tithe map reproduced by permission of the Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Record Service).

east–west market road. In addition, it links together most of the other archaeological features of the historic core of the town, such as the church of St Andrew just to the north (the earliest fabric dates to the 14th century, but it is thought to occupy the site of an earlier church), and connects these features with the ringwork on the other side of the river. In short, it completely transforms the accepted interpretation of Biggleswade and its street pattern. It makes us look afresh at the broad road (that became the market place) as an original rather than ‘added-on’ archaeological component, and invites a new theory of town origin and development.

Many questions arise as a result of bringing the results of the landscape study to bear upon the study of the town (and vice-versa), prompting numerous possible avenues of further research. What is the relationship between town and droeway? Did the droeway develop as an east–west route into and out of an already existing settlement? Or, more likely perhaps, did the town originate and develop on the course of an already existing and much older droeway route? If the droeway really is middle to late Saxon in date, what does this tell us about the origin of the town? Given its direct association with the droeway, could the town market have originated primarily as an animal market? Indeed, did the trade in animals provide the economic stimulus to urban development in the first place? Could the ford and incipient town, paired with the ringwork on the other side of the river, have marked a toll point for herdsman and their animals on transhumance routes? Was such transhumance taking place over small or large distances?

Several roads entered Biggleswade from the northeast, east and southeast, converging on the east side of town. Incoming traffic from that side was effectively channelled into and through the market-place, across the

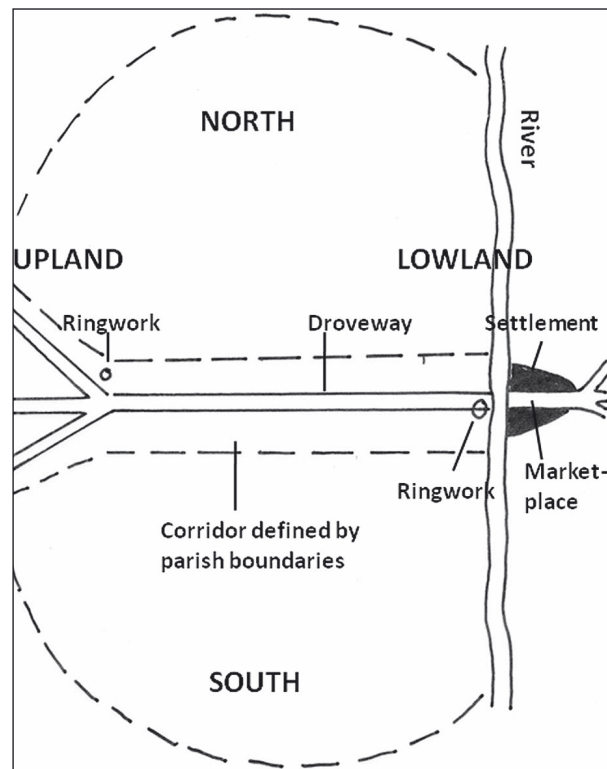


Figure 6 Elements of a landscape.

ford, past the ringwork and along the droeway on the other side. In many ways Biggleswade can be viewed as a funnel or entrance for the broad droeway (see Oosthuizen 1993 and 2002 for comparative examples). The flanking ditches and parish boundaries which run parallel to and on both sides of the droeway indicate that at one time this corridor of land, and whatever traffic passed through it, was rigidly controlled. Only when the droeway reaches the village of Old Warden by the ringwork at Quince Hill, at the end of the corridor defined by the parish boundaries, did the road split into several branches and diverge outwards along the Greensand Ridge and in other directions. Incoming traffic from the western side would have been similarly channelled. The main elements of the landscape described are depicted schematically in Fig. 6.

Key to understanding the landscape depicted is perhaps the connection the droeway afforded between upland and lowland zones, or summer and winter pasturage. In addition to local systems of transhumance, however, there may also have been long-distance movements of animals. The Greensand Ridge, running from southwest to northeast, was one of the major routes through Bedfordshire, linking the droeway to a much wider system of tracks and routeways (Hindle 2008). In this context, Biggleswade was perhaps just a temporary halt and watering-hole – a place passed through rather than an end-point on droving journeys. Yet the existence of the Old Warden corridor and the two ringworks at either end of the corridor indicate that the movement of animals across the Ivel valley was highly structured and organised, perhaps for reasons of toll-collection. It was a landscape of power, surveillance and control.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to combine aspects of urban and rural archaeologies in order to view a landscape that encompasses both. Market-places, streets, and other features of town layout are not unconnected to rural features like droveways – which themselves may be associated with fords, farms, chapels, churches and ‘castles’, both inside and outside the town. Inclusive study of townscapes (and cityscapes) within their wider landscapes can transform the archaeological understanding of urban growth and development.

Systems of animal transhumance and elements of their material infrastructure in Saxon and Medieval England, unlike those of prehistory (Pryor 1996), have received little attention – despite ample documentary evidence for the immense economic importance of the wool trade. This paper has described material evidence which provides a glimpse of the sheer scale, previously unsuspected, on which such systems may have been organized and controlled.

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